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Motherless Tongues: The Insurgency of Language amid Wars of Translation

Vicente L. Rafael
Durham: Duke University Press; Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2016, xii+255pp.

Vicente L. Rafael's *Motherless Tongues: The Insurgency of Language amid Wars of Translation* examines the ways in which translation—its processes, politics, contradictions, and possibilities—works in various social, historical, and cultural contexts. *Motherless Tongues* is preoccupied with "a set of questions held together by recurring obsessions about the politics of language and the ethics and pragmatics of translation" (p. 9). As such, *Motherless Tongues* both extends and departs from Rafael's *Contracting Colonialism* (1993), *White Love* (2000), and *The Promise of the Foreign* (2005): translation serves as a pivot around which all these books move, but in *Motherless Tongues* a number of the topics are new terrain for Rafael. The questions in *Motherless Tongues* are explored with respect to examples that range from late nineteenth-century Philippines to the war on terror in the United States as well as the country's subsequent occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq, and narratives of the development of various academic fields. The three parts of the book indicate the areas in which translation is at play: the first part—"Vernacularizing the Political"—considers the importance of translation in historical junctures such as the transition of the Philippines from American colonial to postcolonial status. The second part—"Weaponizing Babel"—examines the role of translation in the attempts of the United States to turn its occupying soldiers—through training, technology, and protocols—into language-enabled forces. The third part—"Translating Lives"—looks at the ways in which translation figures in the development of academic fields such as area studies, Philippine anthropology, and Philippine history, with emphasis on the intellectual trajectories of Benedict Anderson, Arjun Appadurai, Renato Rosaldo, Reynaldo Ileto, and Rafael himself.

In his introduction, Rafael presents an overview of the personal circumstances, as well as the theoretical and methodological armature of *Motherless Tongues*. He offers "a condensed inventory of [his] linguistic legacy" (p. 5): in a household where Rafael's father spoke Ilonggo and his mother spoke Kapampangan, "English [became] their lingua franca" (p. 2). Growing up, Rafael would read *Hiligaynon*, the Ilonggo-language magazine, and hung out with the children of Chinese neighbors who spoke Tagalog and English with Hokkien cuss words occasionally mixed in. Rafael's father spoke to the household in Ilonggo. Rafael's maternal grandfather was fluent in Spanish—the language of Philippine law until 1941—and spoke to Rafael in Tagalog and English; with Rafael's mother and aunts, Rafael's grandfather would speak in Kapampangan, Tagalog, and English. Code switching was also prevalent in private schools: "conyo-speak, collegiala talk, Arneo accents." Gay lingo also emerged during the 1960s, mixing vernaculars, bending English and Spanish grammars, and time and again using "bastardized words from French and German" (p. 4). In high school Rafael

was introduced, by way of left-wing activism, to Marxist-Leninist-Maoist literature in English translation; moreover, Tagalog was used by activists in ways that were "lively, innovative, and full of trenchant humor critical of authority" (p. 4). This plural linguistic environment engenders the condition of having "no mother tongue" or, conversely, having "many mother tongues." A multilingual context (for Rafael and other Filipinos inside and outside the Philippines) implies the need for "inter- and intralinguistic translation": the ability to translate "across different languages" and "within the same language" when used in various ways in various situations (p. 5). This linguistic mash-up—suggestive of the confluences and conflicts of political ideologies, subcultures, and regions in the Philippines—becomes the starting point for Rafael's reflections on the politics and practices in contemporary translation.

For Rafael, communication is made possible when there is a "reciprocal, translative relationship between *I* and *you*" (p. 4). But, as his personal narrative and individual chapters show, these relationships between I and you are constituted within multiple languages, engendering what Rafael calls, following Roman Jakobson, "metalinguistic operations": participants in situations that call for translations recognize that translations are unable to offer "the exact equivalence of the substance and style of one language in another" (p. 8). The resulting condition is "aporetic"—a linguistic impasse—and it is precisely these situations of aporia that Rafael considers in *Motherless Tongues*. For Rafael, the impasse, put generatively, is a zone of insurgency and play; he recognizes the "capacity [of language] to resist reduction and conversion into definitive meanings and authoritative intentions" (p. 14).

The first part—"Vernacularizing the Political"—looks at three instances in colonial and postcolonial Philippines and examines how the plurality of languages, as conditioned by discrepant social formations, helped constitute (and, at times, tear asunder) an emerging Philippine nation. Chapter 1, "Welcoming What Comes: Translating Sovereignty in the Revolutionary Philippines," examines three competing notions of sovereignty. The first is Spanish imperial sovereignty, which, although typified by "absolute power . . . free of any obligation and conditions" (p. 22), nevertheless had to be manifested through "mediating institutions" such as bureaucracy, law, armies, collection of tribute, among others (p. 23). Second, for Apolinario Mabini, fighting for national sovereignty was "the most compelling evidence of the people's enlightenment" (p. 30), and yet, as seen in the Philippine Proclamation of Independence, "the Revolution restor[ed] the people's lost sovereignty" while at the same time reinstituted a social hierarchy that placed ilustrados above the Filipino masses who comprised the "overwhelming majority" of the emerging nation (p. 28). The third notion of sovereignty is seen in the Tagalog term *kalayaan*—a "vernacular experience of freedom" (p. 35). Rafael closely reads accounts of the Philippine Revolution by Santiago Alvarez and Emilio Aguinaldo and proposes that *kalayaan* is "contingent on everyday acts of *damayan*," which is "an ethic of compassion" that "generates the radical identification of one with the other, implicating each in the other's deeds and sentiments" (p. 39).

Chapter 2, "Wars of Translation: American English, Colonial Schooling, and Tagalog Slang," looks at educational policies and practices during the American colonial period in the Philippines, which Rafael characterizes as "fraught with contradiction" (p. 44). Filipinos were "incorporated" into the "emergent colonial regime" and yet were "[kept] at a distance from the metropolitan center" (p. 44). Moreover, the use of English magnified already existing social and economic inequalities. English produced a "linguistic hierarchy that roughly corresponded to a social hierarchy" (p. 45). Rafael then describes the nationalist response to this situation: for Renato Constantino, the moribund national situation was a consequence of miseducation, and English was its main instrument; Filipinos subscribed to American notions of modernity and aspired to become Americans themselves. For Constantino, remaining a vassal to the United States was one of the reasons why the Philippines stayed "economically underdeveloped, socially divided, politically corrupt, and culturally bankrupt" (p. 46). Hence, Constantino, in Rafael's estimation, considers English as having "fatal consequences" for the nation: its history was fraught with amnesia, and its discourse—with respect to both foreigners and fellow Filipinos alike—was typified by inarticulacies and infelicities (p. 49). For Rafael, contra Constantino, Nick Joaquin does not oppose debasement (expressed in slang, the language of the streets) but rather considers it as a possible basis of a national language. This, to be sure, is qualified by Rafael: "[slang] cannot be seen to form the firm bedrock on which the national language is built; rather it is a shifting and protean node linking various languages as in a network" (p. 64). In this light, slang is both an expression of the playful possibilities of language as well as a glimpse of the past as "fractured, inconclusive moments [rendered by] a series of linguistic associations" (p. 65).

Chapter 3, "The Cell Phone and the Crowd," considers both cell phone and crowd as forms of media. The cell phone—with its capacity to send and receive text messages and calls—"was invested with the power to overcome the crowded conditions and congested surroundings brought about by the state's inability to order everyday life" (p. 73). Moreover, for Rafael, the crowd also functions like a medium, "a way of gathering and transforming elements, objects, people, and things mixing them up and converting them into other than what they were" (p. 85). In this sense the crowd can be viewed as a "site for the articulation of fantasies and the circulation of messages," "a kind of technology itself" (p. 85). But as Rafael points out, in a hierarchical Philippine society even crowds have class distinctions: the predominantly middle-class crowd of EDSA II, which overthrew Joseph Estrada in January 2001, had for its obverse the predominantly urban poor crowd, which in April 2001 called for Estrada's reinstatement (p. 93).

The next part—comprising Chapters 4 and 5—looks at American empire critique from the vantage point of translation history and practice in the United States. Chapter 4, "Translation, American English, and the National Insecurities of Empire," demonstrates that the makings of the American empire—a process that began when Americans gained independence from the British—was grounded on a nationalist idea of language: that to be American, one must be monolingual.

Rafael describes the ways in which monolingualism was attained by the United States, pointing out its relation to democracy and national identity: "we sense how the work of translation was geared to go only in one direction: toward the transformation of the foreign into an aspect of the domestic, and thus the plurality of native tongues into the imperious singularity of a national tongue" (p. 110). However, becoming monolingual was at the expense of other languages, which were repressed; Rafael cites examples such as the process of compiling Webster's dictionary as well as government policies as instrumental in repressing linguistic multiplicity. Finally, the complications of language are brought to bear on America's involvement in Iraq: in particular, the ways in which the figure of the translator occupies an ambivalent position. Translators were "stranded between languages and societies [and] were also exiled from both," eliciting respect and suspicion among US military personnel, and derision from their fellow Iraqis who considered them as mercenaries (p. 117).

Chapter 5, "Targeting Translation: Counterinsurgency and the Weaponization of Language," outlines the various attempts of the US military to weaponize language. For instance, the US military attempted to train soldiers to become "language-enabled" (p. 124) and thus be capable of tasks such as regulating traffic through checkpoints, eavesdropping during patrols, interacting with children, and being "ideal substitutes for native interpreters" (p. 125). The military also developed translation systems; devices such as the Phraselator and the Speechalator used automatic speech recognition technology. Finally, protocols codified the ways in which native interpreters related with civilians and the US military. Since the position of the translator was ambivalent—"weaponized, [the translator] can target but also be targeted, fire as well as backfire" (p. 133)—protocols ensured that the translator would stay unobstrusive: to become a "visible invisibility . . . an active collaborator in the task [of counterinsurgency]" (p. 134). However, these attempts at weaponizing language have limitations. For example, the automatic translation systems remain crude and unable to discern social and cultural contexts in which translation practices are done.

The third part considers the ways in which disciplinal directions can be seen alongside personal trajectories, and how translation plays a part in the formation of each. Accidental encounters—contingencies, unexpected situations, among others—occasion the transformation of a person, disciplinary field, research area, into something else. This transformation—a passage into something other—is for Rafael a form of translation: a process, however uneven and unfinished, in which the self engages with the foreign and hence becomes converted into something else.

In Chapter 6, "The Accidents of Area Studies," Rafael considers the accidents that serve as entry points to academic disciplines. For Rafael, to have an accident means to "come in contact with the radically foreign, a kind of otherness that resists assimilation" (p. 153). The encounter with the foreign leads the emergent scholar to an area whose significance has yet to be discovered, revealing itself only after long immersion in the field. The area studies scholar is seen as a Janus-faced figure: on the one hand, the scholar "comes home and writes about alien places"; on the other hand, the scholar is also a foreigner to these places, "provoking curiosity, irritation, and suspicion

at times, and commanding authority at other times from those he or she encounters" (p. 156). Rafael explores these motifs using two examples: Benedict Anderson and Arjun Appadurai. In the case of Anderson, Rafael observes the fortuities that shaped his career, from going to Cornell University and meeting his mentors, to moving from Indonesia to Thailand on account of the volatile situation in the former country, and having the good fortune of meeting like-minded intellectuals in the latter. Rafael moreover notes that it was Appadurai's early encounters with Western commodities that piqued his abiding interest in globalization and culture: "he becomes an agent of desire whose satisfaction is forever strung out into a potentially endless series of objects: books, movies, blue jeans, deodorants, American social science" (p. 159).

Chapter 7, "Contracting Nostalgia," considers the career of the anthropologist Renato Rosaldo, whose main work was on Ilongot headhunting. Rafael examines the various inflections of nostalgia, as manifested in Rosaldo's work. For example, Rafael mentions that Rosaldo tried to expunge imperialist nostalgia: Rosaldo knew that "nostalgia in the service of imperialism memorializes the death of the other's culture while sanctifying the perpetrators of the latter's demise" (p. 163). Imperialist nostalgia was also connected to ethnographic nostalgia—a condition wherein postcolonial ethnographers "signal[ed] their unavoidable complicity" (p. 165) to the emergence and dominance of empire, while keeping an ironic distance from its effects. Rafael also considers Rosaldo's notion that for the Ilongots—Rosaldo's abiding informants and friends—nostalgia "is . . . a recent development": while undergoing significant, often irreversible, social and cultural change, the Ilongots "found themselves infected with nostalgia, or at least 'something like it'" (p. 168).

Chapter 8, "Language, History, and Autobiography," examines the "discrepant effects" of translation in the work of Reynaldo Ileto. Rafael observes that in Ileto's *Pasyon and Revolution* (1979) while linguistic hierarchy between English and Tagalog is "leveled," class inequality becomes more pronounced: the book addresses modern, middle- to upper-class Filipino readers who are in a position to understand the masses' traditional ways of thinking. These tendencies, which are "at once contradictory and productive of certain possibilities" (p. 176), typify, for Rafael, Ileto's autobiographical writings.

Chapter 9 features Rafael's interview with *Translation: A Transdisciplinary Journal*, conducted in 2013 at the Nida School of Translation Studies (Italy). Rafael's conversation with Siri Nergaard, editor of *Translation*, offers a compact articulation of the key concepts in *Motherless Tongues*: the war of and on translation, the weaponization of translation, counterinsurgent elements in language, and translation as play. Moreover, Rafael elaborates on his abiding interest in the mutually constitutive areas of history and translation, in view more particularly of his long-standing work in Philippine studies and emerging work in American empire critique.

Motherless Tongues demonstrates Rafael's sharp, substantive, and capacious understanding of the possibilities and limits of translation. With translation as his main optic, Rafael offers timely and cogent interventions in Philippine studies, American empire critique, area studies, literary

studies, media studies, and history. With respect to his approach, Rafael's methods are rigorous and sound. He is able to historicize concisely and substantively the various issues. Moreover, Rafael analyzes textual evidence, cultural phenomena, and translation practices with clarity and intelligence; his style uses a range of registers: aphoristic, descriptive, wryly ironic, and philosophical. Rafael is also keenly aware of the contentious and historically charged politics of the events he considers, and the ambivalences they generate.

Rafael's materials include US military manuals; concepts from Jacques Derrida, Roman Jakobson, and Emile Benveniste; songs and accounts from the Philippine Revolution; documents from the Spanish and American colonial periods; narratives from his fellow scholars; and eyewitness reports from events such as EDSA II. The plurality of these materials demonstrates Rafael's extensive grasp of various archives, as well as his capability to read his sources against and alongside each other. There are rare occasions, though, when Rafael could have added some more substance: in Chapter 3, for example, his reading of middle-class politics in EDSA II ("the utopian side of bourgeois nationalist wishfulness: the abolition of social hierarchy" [p. 86]) is buttressed by just one account of a participant. My sense is that the account Rafael closely reads, although compelling and visceral, may need other complementary sources: one story does not make it into a metonym for the middle class.

All told, Rafael's *Motherless Tongues* is a valuable contribution to translation studies, especially in relation to Philippine history and culture, American empire critique, and area studies. The flow of the chapters is well considered: the book attends to the Philippines, then focuses its attention on the United States, and concludes with accounts of various individuals whose lives are embedded in—and critique—these mutually enfolded contexts. Rafael's gifts as an essayist are on full display: his prose is typified by equal parts charge and clarity; the gravity of colonization and empire is counterpointed by the lucidity and brio of his prose.

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Language, Migration, and Identity: Neighborhood Talk in Indonesia

Zane Goebel

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, xvii+221pp.

Zane Goebel's monograph detailing the face-to-face encounters between residents in the ethnically and linguistically diverse town of Semarang (Central Java) provides an excellent case study of the way linguistic ethnographic methods illuminate larger questions of urban transformation, social incorporation and exclusion, and patterns of migration in Southeast Asia. In fact, with the exception